



Sermon: Jesus: The Central Figure on History's Stage – Todd Goldschmidt
Sunday Service 10:15 am – February 19th, 2012 – At [Living Hope Lutheran Church](#)

Lesson/Sermon Text: 2 Kings 2:1-12 – (NIV 1984)

Elijah Taken Up to Heaven

¹ When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.”

But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.

³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “but do not speak of it.”

⁴ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.”

And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho.

⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” he replied, “but do not speak of it.”

⁶ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.”

And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on.

⁷ Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

¹⁰ “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not.”

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.



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All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts. (II VII)

Shakespeare penned in his play, *As You Like It*? One player on this world's stage made his exit ages before, and countless acts after, his final entrance: the prophet Elijah. His "exit stage left" was well cued. His successor, the prophet Elisha, was vexed by it. Two "schools of the prophets" (the theological seminaries of the day)—one at Gilgal and one at Jericho—each asked him, "Don't you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" Both times, Elisha sighed in resignation, "Yes, I know, but do not speak of it." He knew too well that his master and mentor, the prophet Elijah, must be taken from him, but he was in no mood to discuss it. Elijah, too, tried to dissuade Elisha from accompanying him on his final earthly trek. He told his young protégé: "Stay here, the LORD has sent me to Bethel, to Jericho and the Jordan." But Elisha refused. "I will not leave you," he resolved each time. And in the end, his persistence paid off.

The nature of Elijah's departure was even more remarkable than its heralding. So far as we know from biblical history, only two other individuals left this world's stage in a similar fashion—one centuries prior to Elijah, and the other centuries later. Back at the outset of time, there lived a God-fearing man named Enoch. His predecessors, as well as his descendants, are listed in the following fashion: "So-and-so *lived* x-number of years, and then he *died*." But not Enoch! The Word of God says of him: "Altogether, Enoch lived 365 years. *Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away*" (Gen. 5:23-24). Enoch shows up again in the NT book of Hebrews. There the inspired writer says of him in the "Hall of Faith," chapter 11: "By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God" (v. 5).

You've probably already figured out the Jesus is the other person who was translated bodily to heaven. The Book of Acts records that after Jesus commissioned His disciples "be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth . . . he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." His dumbfounded disciples "were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven'" (vv. 8-11). "Gentlemen, there's work to be done!" God's angels announced in effect. "Jesus will return—bodily, visibly—just like He left to Judge the living and the dead. So fan out to the far corners of the planet and announce the message that Jesus preached steadfastly while He walked among you: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!'" So they went "to all Judea & Samaria & to the ends of the earth".



But we're getting ahead of ourselves! Let's back the truck up and dig back into our sermon text. Again, only Enoch and our Lord Jesus exited this world's stage like Elijah did—not through death's doorway, but via a bodily, physical translation from earth into heaven. Enoch simply disappeared; Jesus ascended before His disciples very eyes; and Elijah was “walking along and talking together” with Elisha, when “suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.” Elisha witnessed it and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart,” as a sign of His heartfelt grief that he would no longer walk in the presence of, or be mentored by, his predecessor, Elijah.

But Elijah's part on the world's stage wasn't over! While he stood in the wings, dozens of actors performed their parts: Israel's monarchy rose and fell; the kingdom divided and the people scattered; the Assyrians and Babylonians came and went; Greece reigned, then Rome conquered; and God's prophets took center stage to deliver the lines prepared for them by the LORD. Elijah was gone but not forgotten. Although his exit took place around 850 B.C., some 400 years later God's last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, concludes his book with this prediction: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes” (4:5). John the Baptist partially fulfilled this prophecy, for Jesus said of Him: “all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come” (Matt. 11:13-14). Yet when John's enemies asked him explicitly, “Are you Elijah?” he replied, “I am not” (Jn. 1:21).

That leaves today's Gospel Lesson to unravel the mystery of Elijah's final appearance on this world's stage. On a “high mountain,” “Peter, James and John” saw Jesus “transfigured before” their eyes! “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.” Luke says they “spoke” with Jesus “about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.” Years later, Peter wrote of that day: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power & coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain” (1:16-18).



Our faith isn't founded on "cleverly invented stories," but on the "eye witness" accounts of God's inspired scribes! We don't trust in idols of our own invention, but our "help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth" as the Psalmist says (121:2). With Paul we rejoice that purely by God's grace through Spirit-wrought faith you and I are "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:19-20). Some two millennia ago, the most astounding act in humanity's play was coming to a head off stage, behind the scenes. The divine plot was advancing according to script, though the Director's hand remained obscure. Way backstage, a player takes His place; the "chief cornerstone" is about to be set in place as the Rock of man's salvation. Although conceived in miraculous fashion by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin maiden, He nonetheless enters the world in the ordinary way, born of a woman.

In plays, as so often in life, "timing is everything." The Bible says of the divine Director's perfect timing: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). At the precise moment in His historic drama, when all hope of any reconciliation with our Holy Creator seemed lost forever, when God's repeated prophecies of a coming Messiah had all but disappeared from His people's consciousness but for a remnant of true believers that remained, the play's most important Actor entered the scene "stage right." In word and deed; by perfect obedience to God's law and fulfillment of its Messianic prophecies; Jesus revealed Himself as the divine Son of God who—in the course of time—also became fully human in order to serve as our saving Substitute!

Jesus' "departure" was at hand: that glorious moment when He would suffer and die for the sins of mankind at the hands of His enemies; that even more majestic morning when He would rise from the dead to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that He really had redeemed us from death and hell itself! But before He climbed Mount Calvary to be sacrificed on the altar of the cross, He climbed a "high mountain" with His three closest earthly companions. Enter Moses—the Lawgiver of old, the character who led God's people out of slavery, their guide and mediator with Jehovah. Enter Elijah, the prophet predicted to return at the time of God's Anointed One, during this earth's final act. And then there's Jesus—de-masked for a brief moment in time, sans the costume of His humility, outshining the sun, overshadowed by the cloud of divine presence with the affirming voice of His Father declaring: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Then something more subtle, yet equally instructive occurred: "Suddenly, when [the disciples] looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus." While Moses' and Elijah's entrance is important, their departure is even more so. Their exit means that the Old Covenant of the Law had been completed and the age of prophecy had been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth!



So, “Down from the Mount of Glory, came Jesus Christ our Lord.” As much as Peter, clearly clueless, wanted to stay on that mountain, basking in Jesus’ divine presence, and building “three shelters—one for [Jesus], one for Moses and one for Elijah” (as if that were necessary!)—Jesus still had the most vital aspects of His saving role to bring to a conclusion in Jerusalem and its environs. He still needed to utter the most significant expression in the divine drama of human history—“It is finished!”—in order to assure us that our debt of sin had been paid in full by Him. He still needed to prove that fact by His glorious resurrection from the dead. And He still had to ascend back up into heaven to prepare our rooms, to intercede with the Father in our behalf, to work all things in life out for our ultimate, eternal good, and to empower us by His Holy Spirit to spread His gospel—this good news—to others so that more of His elect can be called to faith in Him through our witness. So we trust, we anticipate, we pray and we work for His glory! We tell others what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: that “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” We inform them that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us!” (5:6 & 8). What fantastic news!

Is it easy to be Christ’s ambassadors? We know better. All sorts of obstacles stand in our path, not the least of which is Satan, “the prince of this world.” But he’s been defeated by Jesus, and his diabolical work was demolished by our Savior at His cross and empty tomb! Nothing, Jesus promises—not even the gates of hell itself—can stand in the face of His Church and its saving message. Nothing! So what are we waiting for? We have the proof, we have the power and we have the promise of our conquering King who assures us: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20)! The end of the age, when earth’s final curtain drops, and no more acts or encores follow is fast approaching. Friends—fellow actors on life’s stage who have been led by God’s Spirit to understand the big picture and to “see” God’s work that goes on behind the scenes in the “heavenly realms”—let’s “work while it is day, before the night comes when no man can work” (Jn. 9:4). Christ’s work is done in the trenches, by bit-part players like you and me, members of the cast of Christian men and women, young and old, who will receive the accolades of God Himself as we exit this life and enter heaven’s gate. “Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master’s happiness!” He’ll say. “Welcome home!” Amen.